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Narsinh Mehta's Contribution to Gujarati Literature

Whenever Dharma is in danger God comes on the Earth, so says the Gita. It is a fact undoubted and undisputed that He saved the Dharma several times but He cannot come in midst of the erring society every now and then. The world is full of people who are in the habit of committing sins and endangering Dharma and duel of evil and good is always evident in the world. Looking to the circumstance, magnitude of Adharma, and necessity He sends some chosen and gifted souls on the Earth to do His work of restoration of Dharma and infuse faith and hope in the miserable creatures, and Narsinh Mehta was the one.^[1] The poetry of Narsinh Mehta is a proud possession of Gujarati literature.

Every language is a reflection of the contemporary society and Gujarati is no exception. It captured mood and currents of India and became the voice of the parallel literature. The path of Gujarati literature was paved by Hemachandracharya's contribution but it was cemented with the medieval literature of the Bhakti movement which took birth in the 15th century. This era heralded the birth of this powerful poet, Narsinh Mehta, who revived, in abundance, melodious short poems not so prevalent till then. He is the pioneer of meta-physical poetry of medieval Gujarat. He is known for his literary forms called pada (verse), Aakhyan and Prabhatiya.

Narsinh's poetry emerged at the time when religions had grown up like mushrooms in Gujarat. People had their own views and concepts of life, and were inclined to listen to all that might soothe and console or elate them. Each locality had thus its own traditions, and was ready to save them incorporated in some myths and fictions. It was the time when the society was wandering in dark and there was no sign of light for the people of Gujarat. They required someone to lead them and guide them. In these circumstances Narsinh Mehta appeared on the scene and preached the gospel of Bhakti boldly and rightly, without fear or favour. His poetry served as a lighthouse to the baffled society. He gave the people of Gujarat the message of hope and faith and simplifying the difficult doctrines of the Vedic philosophy told them that the real bhakta is one who is away from hypocrisy and who is happy in other's happiness. His mastery lies in teaching the most difficult philosophy by the medium of bhakti to explain what the Upanishads and the Vedas taught in thousands of pages.

Though born in a conservative and upper-caste Nagar community, Narsinh was one of the strongest critics of the caste system and its evils. His benevolent and saintly nature revolted against the treatment of untouchables by the so-called upper class people. Because he had realised the ultimate truth that God resides in each human being. The lower caste people of Junagadh requested Narsinh to go to their quarters and join them in their devotional exercises of singing and dancing, and he complied at once with their request. He passed whole nights in close association with this untouchable community, for which he suffered the anger of his caste men also. Thus, he is such a rare personality who could utter harsh words for hypocrites and at the same time sing for "the poorest and lowliest" amicably.

A close reading of his poems reveals that he was a great and ardent bhaktawho did not stick to the routine method of worship or to the prevalent mode of Bhakti. Narsinh adopts harsh tone in some of his later compositions which resonate with existential anguish and bitterness. His poem 'Dhyan dhar Hari tanu alpamati alsu (You foolish idler! Dwell on Sri Hari)' has a moral tone. The poem is a warning to ordinary human beings. The poet uses harsh words as "foolish idler" for those who are engaged in other business which ultimately will lead them to death. Only His name can save them from miseries of life and death.

Narsinh gave the contemporary society a unique vision. One of the most remarkable qualities of Narsinh is that his was no mere pedantic, parrot-like repetition of holy incantations and spiritual

formulas. Rather it was an attempt to define a new set of spiritual values which could contribute something genuine to the solution of the spiritual disaster prevalent in his times. The difference between true devotees and hypocrites is highlighted in the poem 'Naam pamyo pan Ramane nav lahya (Fame you earned, worshipped not Rama)'. The poem shows that that the poet is against mere meaningless recitation of God's name.

Further, Narsinh believes that without analytical introspection and purification of the physique (gross and subtle), the final truth cannot be realised. One cannot reach the goal merely by the study of books. The real meaning of learning is to know and feel the existence of God in the entire universe. This fact is clearly stated in the poem 'Sharir shodhya vina (Without analytical introspection)'. In this instructive pada Narsinh lifts the weight of dogma off our minds. The body is composed of a few trifle worldly elements but it is the abode of the Absolute. It is useless to go on a pilgrimage, or to read Sastras or to follow religious practices. One has to realise the Beloved One in the heart of other fellow beings.

In the poem 'Rajhalati randna radavadata chhokara (Orphaned children of wayward woman)' the poet states in a straightforward manner that guided by sheer illusion, ignorant human beings worship stone and indulges in self-glory and dispute. They do not know the mystery of Brahma and are neither aware of the Nirguna Lord, nor familiar with the Saguna Lord. The poem is bitter and harsh in tone and shows that Narsinh is against pretensions in religion. Similarly, the poem 'Jya lagi Atama-tatva chinyo nahi' warns against pretentious devotion. He, very boldly, says that the observance of different means of spiritual discipline is false if it does not enable one to realise the Supreme Soul. The only worthwhile spiritual activity is to know the 'inner self'. All other ways, like rituals, austerities, study of the scriptures, etc., are a waste of time and merely ways of 'filling the stomach', i.e. self maintenance.

Narsinh's religion is the universal religion of man. According to him the essence of religion consists in the development of spiritual qualities which give us a will to understand other's pains and sufferings. He enumerates the peculiarities of a true devotee in his world famous song Vaishnavajana to tene re kahie. It leads us step by step to the sanctum of true devotion and chastity. It is a simplified version of what the Gita comprehends thus:

Asaktabuddhih sarvatra jitatma vigataspruhah I
Naiskarmyasiddhim paramam sanyasenadhigachati II
Sidhim prapto yatha Brahma tathapnoti nibodha me I
Samaseneiva Kaunteya Nistha jnanasya ya para II 18 (49-50)

(He, who is unattached to the worldly affairs, who has a restrained mind, who has no desire whatsoever, who has controlled all his senses, who has no interest in the result of any action, who has got the accomplishment by inhabiting a lofty self, O Kaunteya! Listen from me how such a splendid and accomplished individual attains the state of oneness with the Brahman.)

Narsinh's definition of a true Vaishnava comprises of the above shloka and much more. His thoughts on religion, as spelt out in this pada, are instructive and reformative.

For Narsinh, God is to be found not in temples but in humanity itself. The Vedantic concept of divinity in man – Nara Narayana- was developed in his philosophy of religion, rejecting the formal religions with their rituals, superstitions and mythologies:

Pindma prabhu pan pragat pekhe nahi, phogat bhame te door bhale,
Aganit Brahmanu ganit lekhu kare, dusht bhavhe kari maal zaale.

(Such showy souls have no eyes to see the Lord within them, but fumble here and there believing Him far away. They reduce to calculation the infinite Brahma merely by turning beads; soiled with worldly cravings they defile the rosary itself.)^[2]

The above examples show that Narsinh was against hypocrisy in religious practice. He considered empty rites and ceremonials without knowing the true essence of religion worthless. Instead, he laid great stress on popularity of character, simplicity and sincere devotion rather than on caste status and bookish knowledge. Not only that, he called the trodden people the children of Hari- Harijana. This word was later adopted by Mahatma Gandhi to denote all the outcasts and untouchables of

traditional Hindu society. Thus, besides being a poet, a bhakta and a philosopher, Narsinh was also a social reformer. He found the divine in man and pleaded for his emancipation from bondage. He rebelled against the orthodoxies surrounding him. He worked for one supreme cause, the union of all sections of humanity through sympathy and understanding, by love and noble means.

Mansukhlal Jhaveri writes in his book 'History of Gujarati Literature', "Narsinh is a true bhakta; and a genuine subjective poet. There is an unmistakable ring of sincerity in whatever he says. He has, at the touch of his magic wand, turned philosophy into poetry and many of his padas of jnana and vairagya bear the stamp of a master."^[3]

This Saurashtrian poet lighted a lamp in a gloom of night. In the time of political and moral disasters, he fervidly sang the poetry of moral strength and religious consolation and helped his fellowmen to stand strongly against their adversities. And that, indeed, in the ultimate analysis, is the principle role and function of a true poet-and a very crucial function, too, because society nourishes or vanishes according to the active moral or immoral principles that govern it. "He broke away from the lifeless tradition of his days. He changed Gujarati poetry from an impersonal to a personal art. Poet, bhakta, apostle of Aryan culture-Narsimh was, and is, unique in Gujarat."^[4]

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